

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

It is now time to return to the claims that were made about Herman Melville's writings in Chapter 1. It was, for example, claimed that his texts are filled with characters and narrators who attempt to feed off others. That this is truly the case should by now be clear. In fact, in Melville's texts, parasitical relations are often so omnipresent that Ishmael's question might be slightly rewritten. Instead of asking "Cannibals? who is not a cannibal?" (*MD* 300), one could ask "Parasites? Who is not a parasite?" Just as Ishmael holds that cannibalistic traits can be found in civilized Westerners, no less than in unenlightened savages, it could also be argued that almost everybody in Melville has parasitic traits—the rich no less than the poor; the productive no less than the idle. The world he creates for his readers is one where no one is totally independent, and where, to some degree or another, the hospitality of others is always threatening to put the recipients in debt. This even holds for proud Ahab, who has no recourse but to ask the *Pequod's* carpenter for help in shaping him a new whalebone leg after he damages his old one: "Here I am, proud as a Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be that mortal inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be free as air; and I'm down in the whole world's book" (*MD* 471–72).

Thus, what Melville indicates is that, as much as one might dream of total independence, dependency upon others—be it for a whalebone leg or for a free meal to sate one's hunger—is everywhere. To arrive at a better understanding of his work, this ubiquity of sponging is something scholars should address in a much more thorough and extensive manner than has hitherto been done. This book is only a step toward this objective, and it is to be hoped that others will further explore the issues analyzed herein, be it through the conceptual figure of the parasite or by other means.

Chapter 1 also made the claim that the manifestations of parasitism in Melville's writings are not static, but that they gradually thicken and become more complex over time. This process would no doubt have appeared differently if other works than *Typee*, "Bartleby," "Jimmy Rose" and *The Confidence-Man* had been analyzed, but in summary, we have seen how Melville started out his career by creating a parasitic character in search of free meals and an easy life of leisure. Nevertheless, when Tommo's dream comes true, he is ultimately unable truly to enjoy his privileges. His unwillingness to become a proper member of the community that hosts him, finally means that he must give up his pleasant life of "plenty and repose" in the valley of the Typees. In "Bartleby," readers encounter a small Wall-Street microcosm where a limited cast of characters sponge on each other, at least to a certain degree and part of the time, and where everything seems to revolve around the question of consumption—if not for Bartleby, at least for the narrator. Just like "Bartleby," "Jimmy Rose" features a first-person narrator with parasitic traits of his own, who is telling the story of a parasite-like character—the primary difference being that while Bartleby is a thoroughly paradoxical sponger who prefers to abstain from food, Jimmy Rose more obviously belongs to the lineage of the classical literary parasite. Finally, in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville gave shape to a chaotic, floating system where almost everybody in one way or another seems to be out to feed upon the resources of others, in the process producing an abundance of "idle talk" not unlike that which the narrator is serving his readers. As I have been suggesting, one way of framing this shift is through Serres' concepts of the parasitic chain and cascade. The evolution traced in this study can be said to go from a single parasite to a parasitic chain, to a full-blown parasitic cascade made up of several intertwining chains constantly overlapping, diverging, and folding into each other.

As a corollary, some comments may also be offered regarding the relationships between the various systems and the foreign bodies that come to inhabit them encountered in these texts, although less so in "Jimmy Rose" than in the others. In *Typee*, the parasitic Tommo is clearly an exception from the perspective of the system. More precisely, he is an exception

the system wants to incorporate through integrating him into Typeean society, but who ultimately resists being assimilated. In “Bartleby,” the narrator seems to subscribe to a similar view, treating the scrivener as a troubling anomaly that he variously tries to incorporate and expel. So strong is the fascination of this anomaly that it is only with his retelling of Bartleby’s life and death that he finally manages to explain it away. From the lawyer’s perspective, he can then continue believing that the parasitic is the exception, but this happens from a vantage point which is not only high up on the trophic chain, but also relatively sheltered and more stable than *laissez-faire* capitalism, due to the way capitalist dynamics and aristocratic privileges converge in his position as Master of Chancery. However, the narrative undermines this view by indicating that the parasitic is not only present in Bartleby, who might in the end be the least parasitic character in the story, but, to a larger or smaller degree, in everybody around the narrator, himself not excluded.

Thus, what begins to appear as less certain is the idea that the parasite is an exception, that it is something that does not properly belong to the system, something that enters it under false pretenses and threatens to destroy its stability. In *The Confidence-Man*, this grain of doubt has grown to near certainty. The vision of the novel is that of the system found aboard the *Fidèle* as made up of nothing but parasitic elements—strangers and “strangers still more strange” (CM 8)—feeding on each other. What the book hints at is that these foreign bodies are the elementary parts that make up the system in the first place; if it were possible to exclude them all, there would most likely be no system left. Thus, corresponding to the shift from the single parasite in *Typee* to the cascade of parasites in *The Confidence-Man* is an insight that gradually makes it more and more difficult to treat the parasite as an exception to some general rule, as a secondary deviation that society could easily do without; to repeat the third epigraph to Chapter 1: “There is no system without parasites. This constant is a law” (Serres, *Parasite* 12).

Finally, a claim from Chapter 2 must be addressed. During the discussion of *Bleak House*, I asserted that Melville’s parasites are usually highly dissimilar from those of his great British contemporary, and by now this difference should be clear. Just like many of the most important nineteenth

century realists and naturalists, Dickens for the most part operates with a simple dichotomy between productive and unproductive. To him, characters belonging to the second category should clearly be condemned, and for the reader to be able to do so, his immoral, selfish parasites are easily recognizable in their depravity. The irony, of course, is that they are also much more fascinating characters than his heroes, meaning that if they were to be expelled from his narratives, the Dickensian system would end up as a bland one, indeed. Such simple dichotomies are not for Melville, whose parasites are usually difficult to judge in a clear and unambiguous manner. And since many of them combine the positive and inventive with the dependent and base, it is often far from easy to figure out how to understand them, or whether to sympathize with them or not. In the end, not even a minor character like Kooloo is presented in quite as negative a manner as my discussion of *Omo* in Chapter 1 might indicate—after having been dumped and increasingly ignored by the youth, Typee has to grudgingly admit that “[a]fter several experiences like this, I began to entertain a sort of respect for Kooloo, as quite a man of the world” (O 158).

Another difference between Melville and Dickens is that, to the latter, characters are either parasites or they are not; there is little middle ground and few shades of gray. What is entirely lost from view in *Bleak House* is the important question of perspective addressed in the discussion of Shakespeare’s *King Richard II*, namely that one must always take into consideration who is speaking when others are accused of parasitic behavior. That something similar had been realized by Melville becomes evident in his final work of prose, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, posthumously published in 1924. This is not the occasion for a thorough reading of the tale of the handsome and popular title character, who is impressed into service as a foretopman aboard the British man-of-war *H.M.S. Bellipotent* in 1797. Instead, I want to offer some brief remarks on the novella’s ending, just after Billy has been executed after having struck and killed the ship’s Master-at-arms, John Claggart, who had wrongfully accused him of planning a mutiny. From the perspective of this book, the most interesting aspect of the story is the afterlife of the incident, which led to Claggart and Billy’s deaths, as recollected by the narrator:

Some few weeks after the execution, among other matters under the head of “News from the Mediterranean,” there appeared in a naval chronicle of the time, an authorized weekly publication, an account of the affair. It was doubtless for the most part written in good faith, though the medium, partly rumor, through which the facts must have reached the writer served to deflect and in part falsify them. (*BB* 70)

This naval chronicle presents what will come to stand as the official version of the events leading up to Billy’s execution. The account wrongly claims that after Claggart had discovered his plotting and notified the captain, he “was vindictively stabbed to the heart by the suddenly drawn sheath knife of Budd” (*BB* 70). The chronicle then offers the following description of Billy’s supposed background, which—it is strongly indicated—helps explain his violent actions:

The deed and the implement employed sufficiently suggest that though mustered into the service under an English name the assassin was no Englishman, but one of those aliens adopting English cognomens whom the present extraordinary necessities of the service have caused to be admitted into it in considerable numbers. (*BB* 70)

In other words, Billy is presented as an “alien,” a foreign body who has infiltrated the British navy to damage it from within. Even though the word “parasite” is not used here, this type of discourse closely resembles that which near the end of Melville’s life was becoming increasingly common among anti-Semites, and which would about fifty years later help legitimate the Holocaust in Germany: the idea of the Jew as a damaging parasite threatening to destroy the social body. Claggart, on the other hand, is portrayed as the incarnation of patriotism and responsibility: “His function was a responsible one, at once onerous and thankless; and his fidelity in it the greater because of his strong patriotic impulse” (*BB* 70). For all patriotic citizens reading this brief report, it would have been a relief to learn that “[t]he criminal paid the penalty of his crime. The promptitude of the punishment has proved salutary. Nothing amiss is now apprehended aboard H.M.S. *Bellipotent*” (*BB* 70). The damaging foreign body having been effectively eradicated, the system is therefore

free to return to its normal state—or so runs the official story—with this incident quickly fading from the public’s memory. As the narrator puts it: “The above, appearing in a publication now long ago superannuated and forgotten, is all that hitherto has stood in human record to attest what manner of men respectively were John Claggart and Billy Budd” (*BB* 70).

That is, it would have faded entirely from the public’s memory, were it not for the fact that a counter-narrative exists. While not powerful enough to challenge the official version of the incident, it is still the one that is allowed to conclude *Billy Budd, Sailor*. This is the poem “Billy in the Darbies,” said to have “found rude utterance from another foretopman, . . . gifted, as some sailors are, with an artless *poetic* temperament” (*BB* 71; emphasis in the original). Offering a compassionate look at Billy’s last hours, it is very different from the dehumanizing, official discourse of the naval chronicle. That the narrator’s own sympathies are not to be found with the latter is obvious in light of the poem’s ending, where Billy addresses his guard, asking him to ease his handcuffs “at the wrist,/ And roll me over fair!/ I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist” (*BB* 72). Here it becomes clear that Melville, too, must have felt some of the skepticism toward official statements about who should be considered parasitical foreign bodies, as expressed by Shakespeare in *King Richard II*. Just as Melville makes his proper entry on the literary scene with Tommo’s elegy for (free) meals, he makes his final bow with the narrator of *Billy Budd* enjoining readers not to be too hasty in condemning others as damaging foreign bodies. The parasite thus seems to have been there with him from the beginning of his career and to the very end.